

Yuba County County Peer Review Visit Summary

June 5, 2008



CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES

Welfare to Work Division

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Acknowledgements

The California Department of Social Services' (CDSS) Welfare-to-Work (WTW) Program would like to thank Yuba County Welfare Director Suzanne Nobles for volunteering Yuba County to serve as the pilot county for the County Peer Review (CPR). CDSS would like to also knowledge Sutter County Social Worker Supervisor Rick Shies and Glenn County Human Resource Agency Employment Services Manager David Allee for being part of the CPR team. Their program knowledge and expertise was greatly appreciated throughout the CPR site review. CDSS particularly values the constructive comments and suggestions made by Yuba County managers and the county peers about the CPR process and tools.

Background

With the passage of the federal Deficit Reduction Act in 2005 and reauthorization of the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program in 2006, the state and counties must increase their work participation rate (WPR). To assist counties in this effort, the Legislature passed Assembly Bill (AB) 1808 (Chapter 75, Statutes of 2006) which required CDSS to create a CPR program. The CPR is a collaborative partnership between CDSS and the 58 counties that encourages dialogue and the exchange of promising practices, best practices, and lessons learned among counties. The CPR presents an opportunity for counties to see, first hand, how other counties serve their California Work and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) WTW clients. The CPR process allows a site county to select a particular scope area for the review which enables the county to become more informed about successful practices in the most needed areas. The goals of the CPR process include:

- obtaining an understanding of challenges that each county faces with respect to client participation,
- identifying and analyzing key patterns of program strengths and opportunities for improvement,
- presenting recommendations and sharing meaningful practices among comparable counties, and
- identifying the need for and providing ongoing technical assistance to the counties.

For the purpose of the CPR program, best practices are referred to as strategies that have been proven successful (based on data) in engaging participants or administering the CalWORKs program. Promising practices are viewed as strategies that have recently been implemented or developed that appear to be successful, but do not yet have the supporting data to be considered a best practice. Lessons learned are practices that counties have tried but which did not add value to their county operations. Lessons learned can provide useful information to other counties about WTW program strategies that could be avoided or may be successful under different circumstances.

The CPR program was piloted in Yuba County on December 17 to 20, 2007, and February 7, 2008. No specific scope was identified in advance as the primary purpose of the pilot CPR was to test the CPR tools and the CPR process. This visit summary will focus on the CPR team's findings from the review.

Yuba County Welfare Department

Yuba County has two locations in Marysville, California. The Health and Human Services Department, located at 5730 Packard Avenue, provides the following services: intake, orientation and appraisal (and other, non-CalWORKs services). The CalWORKs Division, located at the One-Stop Business and Workforce Development Center (One-Stop), located at 1114 Yuba Street, provides the majority of WTW services for the county. The site review was conducted at the One-Stop location.

Yuba County utilizes integrated caseworkers who handle both eligibility and employment case management duties. Yuba County has employed integrated caseworkers since 1998. The WTW division within Yuba County consists of one intake unit, three ongoing units, one exempt unit, and one sanction unit. The county has an in-house Quality Assurance Review team which reviews cases from caseworkers during each quarter. County supervisors use the Universal Engagement Pending report to track weekly client compliance figures. As part of their administrative duties, assigned clerical staff call clients and record attendance of clients in Job Search classes. Yuba County refers to its caseworkers as "social workers"; however, for consistency in this Visit Summary, line staff who work directly with clients will be referred to as "caseworkers" as it is more closely matches our terminology regarding case management observation.

Yuba County Site Visit General Summary

The CPR team consisted of six CDSS Employment Bureau staff and one reviewer (manager) from each of two peer counties (Glenn and Sutter) for the initial pilot conducted in December 2007. The CPR team held a kick-off meeting at the Yuba County Health and Human Services Department for review participants to come together, become acquainted with the CPR team and review, and discuss the goals of the pilot. The CPR team performed the majority of the CPR site activities at Yuba County's One-Stop Center. During the December site visit, the CPR team conducted

case file reviews and interviewed staff, supervisors and upper management. CPR team members worked in teams of two and reviewed hard copies of client case files. Computer stations and caseworkers were not available for case file reviews; therefore, information gathered during the case file review was limited to the hard case files.

The CPR team interviewed a total of 17 staff (twelve caseworkers, four employment training staff members, and one service aid), seven supervisors, and three upper managers. The interviewees were selected by the county. One to three CPR team members met with staff individually and generally one team member would ask the questions while the other member took notes. However, roles could be intermingled with the scribing member of the team asking follow-up questions so that a dialogue between the CPR team and the county staff developed. The interviews went extremely well, with varying levels of county staff providing information about what works and opportunities for improvement within their program. The interviews also provided an opportunity to open up lines of communication between counties and promote collaboration.

Staff at all levels appeared to be eager to share their opinions and ideas about their jobs and workplace. Some expressed frustration about the current status of the job market, not only in Marysville and Yuba County, but in the greater Sacramento area. They stated that the sluggish job market is stifling their efforts to get clients into unsubsidized employment and off aid. Safety net/timed-out clients present challenges for them, and Yuba County is developing new strategies for this population.

Each day of the site visit concluded with the CPR team discussing trends, unique program components, and challenges noted throughout the day. On the final day, the CPR team presented Yuba County management with the preliminary results of the case file reviews and interviews.

During the first visit, the CPR team realized that the case file review tool, which was used to locate specific information in a case file, was not likely to produce valuable information about case management practices and more likely to produce information that might be found in a monitoring visit. Between the initial and follow-up site visits, CDSS staff developed a new case management observation process and tool that could be used to collect information about how the county and individual caseworkers manage cases. From this point forward in the Visit Summary, we will refer to all site activities involving case files as case management observation.

The February 2008 follow-up site visit provided an opportunity for the CPR team to test new and revised tools and processes; primarily client focus group interviews and the case management observation process. The CPR team consisted of eight CDSS staff that split into teams of two or three. For the case management observation, each team sat with a caseworker or supervisor at his or her workstation. This allowed for access to both the electronic and hard copy portions of a case file. After the caseworker or supervisor had pulled a case file, each team used the case management observation tool to conduct a structured "job shadow" interview. This tool facilitates the collection of

information on how caseworkers and supervisor do their jobs and manage cases by guiding them through a case file and prompting discussion of all aspects of a client's progress during his or her most recent time on aid. Cases of various assistance units and statuses were used during this process.

The February 2008 visit also included client focus groups. This additional activity for the second phase of the pilot was recommended by Yuba County upper management and was a huge success. The client focus group questions were provided to Yuba County management in advance, so they would know what would be asked of their clients. The focus groups were held in three venues (e.g., job readiness, job retention and adult education classes) and varied in size from five to twelve clients. Participation in the focus groups was voluntary and included a range of clients--those new to the program, some who have been on aid a long time and clients who have returned to aid. Instructors were asked to leave the room in order to facilitate openness and a sense of anonymity as clients were interviewed.

The focus groups were facilitated by two or three CPR team members. One to two CPR team members asked the questions, while one recorded the answers. The majority of clients were eager and willing to participate. Some clients, who initially declined to participate, joined in the group's discussion and shared their experiences by the end of the session. All CPR team members spoke up at various times to expand the dialogue with each focus group. The clients demonstrated intelligence, thoughtfulness, frankness, and a strong motivation for improving their futures. The client focus groups proved to be a vital part of the pilot and are likely to be just as important in future reviews.

At the conclusion of the day, a debriefing meeting was held with Yuba County Health and Human Services Program Manager, Pam Morasch, regarding the preliminary results of the site review.

The remaining sections of the Visit Summary focus on the results of the review.

Summary of Observations

Promising Practices

Comprehensive Services at One-Stop

The strategy most often identified by staff as successful for clients is the One-Stop where services and programs are co-located for the convenience of both clients and staff. For example, a licensed learning disabilities evaluator works at the One-Stop three days per week. Clients receiving referrals for mental health, substance abuse, domestic abuse assessment and counseling can start and continue their activities at the One-Stop. Classes are held at the One-Stop covering job search readiness, job retention, and general education (GED). Vocational training for individuals seeking careers as office technicians and certified nurse's assistants (CNAs) is also offered at the One Stop. The office technician and CNA courses are especially popular and regularly have waiting lists. The county may consider expanding the number and frequency of the GED and CNA courses and possibly offering training programs for other types of jobs.

Back-up Caseworkers

Caseworkers described the county's back-up worker system during interviews. Caseworkers from various units, on a rotating basis, also cover for caseworkers who are not available due to training, home visits, meetings, illness, vacation, etc. For example, if a client "calls in" and her or his caseworker is not available, an assigned back-up worker handles the client's questions or WTW affairs. The practice of providing a back-up worker to cover for other caseworker staff, when unavailable, ensures clients receive the ongoing attention and direction needed to move them toward self-sufficiency when the primary case worker is unavailable for the client. Focus group clients confirmed that this practice helps them to get prompt answers to their questions. This appears to work well in the county; and the county should considering continuing the practice.

Work Experience

Staff repeatedly and enthusiastically referred to Yuba County's Work Experience (WEX) program as a successful activity for clients. WEX programs provide two categories of essential skills for clients, particularly those with no employment history, to develop personal and employment skills, and also to get job training and work skills. WEX is an unpaid work activity that is intended to lead the client into unsubsidized employment, either with the company that provides the work experience or with other employers. When appropriate, Yuba County caseworkers attempt to place clients in work experience programs as soon as possible after grant determination and the completion of Job Search Readiness and Supervised Job Search.

The county has established partnerships with local businesses, including—but not limited to—Goodwill and Dollar Tree. The county has committed to immediately send staff to the job site to resolve any problem that may arise with a WEX employee. WTW staff stated that it is very easy to place clients in these positions as long as there are

openings. They also emphasized that some of the clients get hired on as regular, unsubsidized employees through their participation as a WEX employee. Even the clients who do not get hired at their WEX site have a higher likelihood of becoming employed elsewhere as a result of their involvement in the WEX program and their acquired skills. The key to the success of this WEX program may be the relationship between the county and the local employers and the immediate response to assist the employer when one of the clients is not working successfully.

Service Aide Worker

The county has a service aid worker whose main duties are to provide transportation to clients to the One-Stop location or other appointments, (e.g., job interviews or doctor's appointments). In this way, clients have assurance that lack of transportation for these very important activities is not a needless barrier to success. This service appears to work very well.

Client Motivation

Yuba County caseworkers also received training on interviewing clients based on the book Motivational Interviewing, by William R. Miller and Stephen Rollnick, which has helped increase the positive nature of the WTW program. As the book's authors explain, "motivational interviewing is an effective evidence-based approach to overcoming the ambivalence that keeps individuals from making changes" in their lives. The concepts and techniques presented in the book have been used successfully to help individuals overcome substance abuse. The same methods are now being used to help motivate WTW clients within the county to make positive changes in their situations. An example of the application of the positive tone is the name given to the county's Sanction Unit, which is now the "Motivation Unit." This reflects the county's positive approach for re-engaging clients who are deliberately not complying with their WTW plan.

An important aspect of motivational interviewing, which is a strength-based approach that helps clients to identify and work through their barriers and to be clear about their goals and their dreams is for clients to personally visualize what self sufficiency could mean for them and their families. Clients discuss and write down measurable action items that can lead to their personal success in life. The theory is that clients without a goal to work toward (e.g., a career and self-sufficiency for their families) and/or a dream to strive for (e.g., taking their family to Disneyland or buying a dependable car) are clients who are set up for failure. This technique for motivating clients appears to be effective.

Strong Caseworker-Client Relationships

Many clients stated their caseworkers do a good job of building trust and a relationship with them (refer back to Staff Interviews about honesty, trust-building, and motivational interviewing). Similarly, clients stated that they are able to reach their caseworkers, when needed, and that their caseworkers do a good job of keeping in touch with them. Many stated that the workers did a good job of informing them of their rights and responsibilities.

Yuba County has a unique 30-year employee retention plan. After six years of satisfactory service, WTW staff receive an annual 1.5 percent pay increase as an inducement to stay in their jobs. This incentive helps the county to retain trained, knowledgeable and experienced employees who can serve CalWORKs clients with consistency and can share their skills with new employees. By decreasing employee turnover, there is greater likelihood that clients will form and benefit from strong relationships with their caseworkers. Clients also benefit from the “back-up” worker program. If they need something and their worker is not available, they know that another caseworker is on standby to assist them. In keeping with the apparent comfort of dealing with a back-up worker, many clients said they had a very smooth, “seamless” transition when they had to change caseworkers.

The clients in the adult basic education class expressed admiration and fondness for their instructors. (GED classes are provided by Marysville Joint Unified H.S. District.)

One unexpected element was that several clients expressed during the focus group meeting that they consider the “threat” of being sanctioned to be a good motivator to stay on track and fully participate with their WTW plan.

When caseworkers have problems getting their clients motivated to fully participate, impromptu multi-disciplinary teams made up of caseworker peers and/or specialized employees (e.g., mental health) are pulled together to brainstorm on ways that might get the client(s) on track to full participation.

To keep the clients on the motivation track, and to promote early engagement, caseworkers move clients quickly from the intake unit to ongoing unit in as little as two or three days. The intake unit staff workers occasionally conduct home visits to clients’ homes to expedite granting of eligibility.

Client Incentives

The county utilizes incentives to motivate clients who have successfully participated in WTW activities, such as department store gift cards, insulated lunch bags with water bottles, and toys for clients’ children during the holidays. These strategies have contributed to positive outcomes among clients.

Challenges

Organizational Structure

During case management observations and interviews, caseworkers explained how the CWD combined eligibility and employment functions. Caseworkers and supervisors talked about a unit called Preventive Services which consisted of Social Worker II's whose main responsibility was to work with the hardest-to-employ clients to address multiple barriers to employment and promote successful WTW participation. It was discontinued and split into the exempt and sanction units. Several caseworkers from the exempt and sanction units said that since being reassigned from preventive services they are spending more time on eligibility and paperwork and less on employment and social work. Staff suggested that management reevaluate work load to improve work flow among staff to ensure that both eligibility and employment duties receive the appropriate attention. Some members of the ongoing units discussed a similar imbalance when working with their cases. They also said that the sanction unit sometimes can't accept cases due to caseload and sends them back to the ongoing units where clients may not receive the specialized handling needed for their reengagement. Some workers and supervisors stated that they thought that eligibility and employment functions should be separate.

Collaboration on Serving Non-English-Speaking Clients

Yuba County employs Spanish and Hmong bi-lingual caseworkers for those clients who need translation services. Caseworkers suggested that the county consider partnering with neighboring counties to better serve other non-English-speaking clients to ensure that Yuba County has enough bilingual caseworkers or interpreters for other the languages spoken by clients.

Caseworkers suggested that staff accompany or "hand-hold" clients referred to services such as mental health or domestic abuse counseling because of the relationship and trust that exists between the caseworker and client and the possibility that the caseworker could lessen the intimidation factor of the referred-to services.

Sharing Resources with Neighboring Counties

Caseworker discussions led to suggestions that the county may consider for future collaboration with the neighboring county, such as sharing information on local job openings, providing transportation for late-shift workers or major employers (casino), as well as hiring a translator for languages spoken in both counties. It was also suggested that neighboring counties could possibly split expenses to provide better transportation for clients –especially those counties that share the same public transit system.

Hardcopy Case Files

The hard copy case files presented a significant challenge during the case file reviews. Staff explained that a lot of case file information is still only available in the hard copy. Even with the case carrying worker, a computer, and Yuba County's hard copy case file organization tool, both caseworkers and supervisors had trouble finding things in the hard copy files. A related concern is that staff expressed frustration with the scanning

and imaging process, which began earlier this year, to transfer items from the hard copy files into the computer. Workers also expressed frustration about sometimes not being able to open or “pull up” imaged documents.

Client Focus Group Feedback

Client focus group participants were candid and spoke enthusiastically about things in the WTW program they liked and those they had problems with. A list of common issues shared by clients follows:

- Overall, clients reported that applying for CalWORKs in Yuba County was slow, but easy.
- Some did not feel that they were adequately involved in developing their WTW plans. They thought their plan did not meet their most immediate need--getting a job to earn money to support their children.
- Some feel that they are placed in an activity to meet their hours with no relation to specific activities to help them increase their income or become self-sufficient.
- Some clients felt that they were being set up for low-paying jobs instead of “careers” which would enable them to make a real living for their families.
- Some clients expressed a lack of understanding about how the various activities and services required in their plan would ultimately lead to their self sufficiency, not just a paying job.
- One client said that while she knew she needed to study for her GED, she did not want to do it 32 hours a week. She felt that only attending adult education classes took up time that could better be spent actively looking for a job.
- Another client said that she wanted to find a job to earn money to support her children. She wanted to split her hours between school and work, stating that her pay plus her grant would be more than the grant alone.
- A few clients also expressed that they received little notification when there was a change with their case files or their WTW plan.
- Many clients thought that their caseworkers, while communicative, did not share all the services available for clients with them. They said they often got the information about services from their peers—other CalWORKs clients they know personally or from classes at the One-Stop.
- Some clients would like more information and assistance with child care referrals. They appeared to be unaware that a child care referral worker is on-site at the One-stop.
- A number of clients said the job retention class was not helpful.
- Clients also expressed with great humor that the CalWORKs videos shown during orientation are “outdated, dorky, boring, and useless.”

With respect to comments made by clients, the county might consider convening focus groups to determine how workshops and trainings might be strengthened to ensure desired outcomes.

Conclusion

Yuba County's CalWORKs program appears to work well. Caseworkers are enthusiastic about their work and have genuine compassion for their clients. Having so many critical services and resources at the One-Stop greatly benefits clients and staff alike. Specialized employees such as the business services worker and the service aide show an attention to specific resources clients need to succeed both as WTW clients and as they become self-sufficient.

The CPR team recommends that Yuba County share some of their promising practices (e.g., successful WEX program and exemption unit) with other county welfare departments through the state WTW Best Practices website.

The CDSS CPR team members learned a lot from observing various activities in the county's WTW program and how staff do their jobs. County staff also provided feedback on the processes and tools used during both visits that helped CDSS staff understand the type of information that would be most useful to county managers and how to better glean such information about the WTW process. By interviewing staff, the CPR team learned that providing county staff with advance information (e.g., the goal of the site visit, interview questions, the client focus group process, etc.) will help them feel more confident and comfortable with their role in the CPR process.

One of the most important things the CPR team learned from the initial site visit was that the case file review tool gathered information more appropriate for a monitoring visit. It did not help the team to observe how caseworkers manage their cases or how clients flow through the program activities and services. Consequently, CDSS developed a case management observation process that it piloted during the follow-up visit in February 2008. The new observation tool gave the CPR team insights into the "how" and "whys" of case management in the county.

The client focus groups, another recommendation made by Yuba County management, proved to be an essential component of the CPR process and greatly expanded CDSS' staff understanding of the activities and challenges of CalWORKs clients and the caseworkers who support them.

The knowledge and experience gained from the Yuba County site visit and future CPR pilots will assist the CDSS and counties in refining and improving the CPR process and tools.